

**Interview with Ursula Mattheisen
conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective
(Not a precise-verbatim transcript)**

September 17, 2007

Linda Byrne - Interviewer: Good morning. It is Monday, September 17, 2007 and I am here at the Merrifield Garden Center with Ursula Mattheisen. We are going to conduct this interview for the purposes of the Providence Prospective which is being done by Supervisor Linda Smith's office.

Linda: Good morning Ursula.

Ursula: Good morning.

Linda: We are going to interview you regarding the Providence District but if you would not mind please start with telling us a little something about yourself.

Ursula: In relation to all of this here in Merrifield we came in the early 1950's but when the owner of the Merrifield Garden Center comes and joins us she will remember better which year. We came in the 1950's because my husband found a job in the government sector and we found a place to live in Falls Church in the Tyler Gardens Apartments. They in themselves are historically valuable because in the early settlements people actually sent out to construct and up until that time there was just a house here.

Linda: Where did you move from?

Ursula: Minnesota. And then we discovered down the road here when Holmes Run Acres was going up where there were one level houses we could afford with two little children. It was a very good time. In that area there was very little traffic. They could go out onto Gallows Road and play

ball and things like that. Then we moved to a larger house when we outgrew that house at Holmes Run Acres.

Linda: What were the addresses' of these homes?

Ursula: Our first address was Sycamore Drive at Holmes Run Acres. Our second address was and still is on Surrey Lane 3423; also at Holmes Run Acres.

Then I noticed here changes were taking place too. There was a man who had a little cart or a wagon and he had a job or it was his enterprise to pick up the trash of a few houses that were out here in the fields. Then one day and I don't know what time there were people I met here who were interested in the property of the older people who did their gardening and they were very nice to talk to. I was hoping that someday that could become a garden because the whole area was beginning to change a little bit. They disappeared and I don't know where they went. Then the man who had the trash pickup business he bought land here in the village, I don't know the details of those things. He started selling flowers to older couples and some new ones and that was the very beginning of the Merrifield Gardens. That grew and grew and grew and she told me the other day [the owner of Merrifield Gardens] they have a Garden Center under construction way out near Warrenton and there is also already one built in Centerville. It's absolutely amazing. There were just two little boys helping and now they are grown up and are still part of the Merrifield Garden Center – which is now a major business in the area. You said you know them.

Linda: Yes, I know that Kevin Warhurst is one of the sons.

Ursula: Next to the Merrifield Garden Center on Lee Highway there is a small one level red brick building and you could see at certain times mostly on Sundays there were groups of black people getting together in front of that building. At first I thought it was a church but it apparently was a community-gathering place. I noticed that over the door there is a sign that says 1870. So that was a black community center.

[We were sitting at Merrifield Garden Center on the north east corner of Lee Highway and Gallows Road and Ursula was pointing to the east to a small building next door.]

Across the road and by the shopping center was a black people's church.

Linda: That would be on the corner of Gallows Road and Lee Highway.

Ursula: No, another Shopping Center on down Gallows Road toward Route 50 is another one. That was a black people's church and if you looked closely that is all there was, a black community and I went over there the other day to get a little of their history but it is a day care center or a school now and here was no one there for me to get any information from.

Linda: Is that the Luther Jackson Intermediate School?

Ursula: No, the school I am speaking about was on the other side of the street from Luther Jackson. On Sunday's the black women were all dressed up looking nice, like it was suppose to be. And everyone was all dressed and looked real nice.

Linda: Is the building still there?

Ursula: No, the building is a bigger building now but the community is still there because on one of the doors I noticed a weekday and Sunday schedule. It is now a white house but you can see it and reach it now by parking at the Silver Diner and it is right behind the Silver Diner.

[The Silver Diner is located at the 8150 Porter Road, Merrifield. This is the intersection of Gallows and Porter.]

Linda: That is near the intersection of Gallows Road and Lee Highway.

Ursula: One time when it was possible to go there I wanted to see what was behind the house with the old brick building, so I parked and went behind the building and there is an old black people's cemetery.

Linda: Wonderful, that was a good find and we will have to check this out and find out the name and of it.

Ursula: Since then I have been there two or three times to see if there was somebody in the building who could tell me something. And one time there was a meeting in there and I did not want to disturb them and I don't know if it was black or white but it was nothing on a day to day basis, but maybe Billy Jean could tell you about it.

Linda: Is that Billy Jean Warhust?

Ursula: I don't know, I never knew her by any other name.

Linda: Billy Jean, yes. We are waiting for her to join us.

Ursula: Then right on the corner of this shopping area, [pointing to the yellow brick house on the southeast corner of the intersection of Lee Highway and Gallows Road for many years used for auto repair] there is a complete house and I think the house was being lived in and whoever lived there a long, long time ago had paintings on the outside that were absolutely beautiful. They were beginning to fade a little bit and I noticed later that they had been retouched. They were not exactly the same, yet still beautiful. I remember that some man wrote an article about that home with the paintings on it in the Washington Post and he felt that this should not be allowed to be changed because it was historically important and it should not be repainted. I contacted the gentleman from the Post and we tried to do something to stop the repainting but it did not work.

Linda: I know the building you are talking about on the Corner of Gallows and Lee Highway and since the 70's, since I have known the building it has been an auto repair shop and that is interesting that someone had lived there and painted on the building. You are right, it would have been better historically if it had been untouched and the original paintings left.

Ursula: Or the job could have been given to an individual who would have been more sensitive to the material and origin of what they meant to show.

Linda: When did they change?

Ursula: They started to change in the 70's about the same time it became an auto shop. What else was here then - the shopping center and the church up there on the hillside. It was always touching to see many of the older people getting dressed up to go to church. In the meantime also, the Merrifield Garden Center just grew and grew and grew.

Linda: That is correct. It is quite a popular and a lovely large garden center owned by the Warhurst family. And like you said, they have several other garden centers around the Northern Virginia area.

[Ursula gets up to go and get napkins for our coffee and when she returned she said]

Ursula: There was a gentleman that is here at Merrifield Garden Center when I went to get the napkins and I asked him if he saw where they keep the napkins and he said, no I am sorry I don't work here, I said that is too bad and he concurred. I thought what a wonderful place this would be to work.

Linda: Tell me a little about the schools in the area and how your children were involved. How old were they when you moved here?

Ursula: The oldest two boys were maybe 5 or 6 years old when we came from Minnesota. I don't even remember which school they went to. Not mine but the predecessors.

Linda: What changes do you see that have taken place and give me your opinion of those changes since you moved to Fairfax County Providence District?

Ursula: Well, the changes, really, one dramatic change was the beltway there was no playing ball on Gallows Road and more people had cars by that time anyway, but the Beltway brought traffic to this area and has not stopped since. Gallows Road was our main connection to this area at that time, including Annandale.

Linda: I would like you to speak about the airport picture that your brought into Supervisor Smyth's office about the airport that use to be at Loehman's Plaza.

Ursula: The airport at Loehman's Plaza, wasn't it amazing to see that picture? The view is from the center of the landing field (where the shopping center is today) toward the beginning line of townhouses on the other side of Arlington Boulevard. There were all these small airplanes parked on the ground and they kept coming and going. Who the owners were, I don't know. One time I drove up Arlington Blvd and there was a boy who stood beside the road near Falls Church and Graham road, there stood this boy and he looked very unhappy or sick and I stopped and asked him if he needed help. He asked me to give him a ride to the airport and he was only about 7 or 8 years old, a kid, so I dropped him off at the airport and he walked off to the airport and down the incline towards the airplanes and I watched him. This boy was determined to get to the airport yet there was no adult supervision, it was a weekend occupation. I drove off towards Gallows road and just as it happened I was lucky there was a police officer in a patrol car and I asked him to keep a watch over this boy to see what he was doing. I did not think he was doing anything bad, he just looked unhappy. Well he was unhappy about some domestic thing. What happened to him I never learned to this day, yet I still see the unhappy face of this child.

There also use to be a small airport at Bailey's Crossroads. My husband had friends from Minnesota, they live in the East now too, but they use to come in on one of those little things [airplane].

Linda: We are interested in all of Providence District which takes in Tyson's Corner, part of Falls Church, a little of Annandale. It also comes on down into the Merrifield area, goes on down to Oakton, skirts around the town of Vienna, City of Fairfax and goes out to Penderbrook out at West Ox Road. Providence District is quite large and the design is kind of a long stretched out rectangular, semi circular area. It is a strange shape.

Ursula: That is the way development went and the population grew. The owners of the Merrifield Garden Center started at Tyson's Corner where they had a small house and came to work everyday to this area. In this area of Gallows Road there were many small houses here on the side streets.

Linda: Tell me about your favorite memory about living in this area.

Ursula: It was all good memories. Not to say this is my favorite memory, but there was no public transportation service and so my husband walked to Annandale Road and caught the bus. This was more than a mile, but he had long legs. I do remember so many nice neighbors, such as the Coopers and Hammerschmidts to name a few.

The neatest memory was in the back yards there were two connected trails in the woods and our boys would use these trails and disappear and I never worried that they could get lost because the woods were small and they had only one or two ways to get out. We use to walk the trails and look at the ruins of an old farmhouse, the creek and a spring that was surrounded by bricks and there was also a big old tree by the house with a heavy branch sticking out and it was said that is where they hung people as a punishment, but I never heard that from anybody else. I believe it was just folk lore.

Then came Loehman's Plaza and then it was still a good trip if you did not have a car you could walk there.

Linda: Is that wooded area still there?

Ursula: A little bit. Where Marriott built their building - I was there recently and the Marriott is building another building and that again is taking away from the original wooded area.

Linda: That is the current intersection of Rt. 50 and I 495.

Ursula: I was glad when I realized that this was going to become a garden center here instead of something commercial like a shopping center.

Linda: Thank you Ursula. We are going to stop here and see if the person we are meeting with has arrived yet. We are waiting for Billy Jean Warhurst. We will end this interview with Ursula and I thank you for your contribution.